



2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: March 6th - 12th

Sermon: March 5th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
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March 6

Acts 9:15

Thus begins the end of Paul's freedom as he enters Jerusalem. After the first week, the rioting and persecution began again. This time, Paul was beaten and placed in chains. These chains were to become part of his journey for the rest of his life. He would never know freedom again this side of heaven. He would find himself standing before one official after the other and transported from one place of confinement to another. The prophecies of the Spirit through the people in Tyre and through Agabus were quickly fulfilled. The wonder and beauty of it all is that even though he was no longer a free man, the gospel and his powerful witness continued in spite of the chains. He was bound, but the gospel was not.

Paul's life serves to encourage us in multiple ways. One such way may be overlooked if one is not careful. What is taking place in this section of the book of Acts and the subsequent chapters to follow is exactly what the Lord told Ananias in a vision would happen (Acts 9:10ff). The passage for our point to ponder today is Acts 9:15. There it is written, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings and the sons of Israel." Dear ones, do you see that all of this is happening in the book of Acts and is climaxed in this section in particular of our journey through Acts. Where we are to be encouraged is in the fact that although he was constantly being put on the defensive, it was actually God's way of fulfilling His plan for Paul's life in the advancement of the gospel through him.

What on the surface may appear to be defense, is actually an offensive move. Paul is bearing witness and giving testimony to his Christian faith and the work of the Lord Jesus among the people. He has bore the name of the Lord among the Gentiles, is about to stand on the stairs of the Roman barracks (Acts 21:40) to speak to the "sons of Israel," and will soon stand before a king, a governor, and a Caesar. All of it will be just as the Lord said. I am encouraged as I type when I pause to reflect on the absolute sovereignty of our great God and King. We are well kept!

My hope for today is that you and I will believe that God truly is working in our lives for His good pleasure and our joy to accomplish the advancement of His kingdom even in this crazy world. To know that your circumstances, both good and bad, are with purpose. Events in your life are not happening by chance and they are not meaningless, fruitless, or wasted as long as you hold on to the hand of the Lord. As pastor Aaron said last week, "We are often playing checkers with one piece all the while God is playing chess with a full board." He is maneuvering the pieces of our lives with purpose, meaning, and love for us.

Jesus told Paul in Acts 23:11, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." Paul had just experienced a difficult and dangerous situation (23:10) and Jesus comforts him with words of providence, sovereignty, and safety. As He watched over and ordered Paul's steps, He will and does the same for all of His children. Take heart family, the Lord has us and will never let us go.

March 7

Deuteronomy 24:18; 1 Kings 19:9-10, 18

This past Sunday for our Sunday School lesson, we studied the 95th Psalm. In that lesson, we discussed the need to remember the marvelous things the Lord has done for us as a means to help us in the “desert” places of our lives. The deserts are the seasons in life when it is dry, when we are weary, and when there seems to be no “word” from the Lord. In those seasons we must rely on what we know to be true concerning God and His Word. Much of the strength that we discover is kindled when we consider all the wonderful deeds of the Lord in the past. The times that He showed up, demonstrated His steadfast faithfulness, and made a way for us when there seemed to be no way, serve to anchor our souls in desert times. I led our class to consider the many verses in the book of Deuteronomy that extolled the people to remember the works of the Lord.

In Sunday’s sermon text, it is written that Paul recounted “one by one” the incredible ways in which God worked among the Gentiles through him and those ministering with him (Acts 21:19). First, notice that Paul did not take credit for the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. He did not say, “Look what I did.” He said, “Look what God did.” More often than not, it will be the humble servant of God who is blessed by His favor more than the one who is seeking fame and notoriety for himself. We can surely surmise that it was for their encouragement that Paul shared the victories of the Lord and the power of the gospel among the lost with the believers in Jerusalem. You might recall that one reason Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem was to give them the gifts from other churches to aid in their poverty and need. The struggling church in Jerusalem needed all the uplift they could get, so Paul began by praising the Lord and encouraging them with the fruit of the ministry among the Gentiles.

This is a good lesson for us to reflect once again on the value of the church. Life can be hard. Following the Lord, fully yielded in obedience in a crooked and perverse generation can also be hard. What we see Paul doing is what we should do in relationship with each other. Times exists when one of us feels beaten down and worn out. In those seasons, we need the voice of encouragement and windows into what God is doing in other places and with other people. To know that He is still drawing people unto Himself, changing lives, and saving people is a necessary component to staying optimistic in a fallen world.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah has become discouraged, fearful, and hopeless as he thinks there is no one left but him who still serves the Lord (1 Kings 19:9-10). God finds him hiding in a cave and asks, “What are you doing here Elijah?” Elijah responds that “I alone am left.” Well, that could surely leave you depressed and hopeless. In reality, that was not the truth. In verse 18 of the same chapter, God says, “I still have 7,000 in Israel that have not bowed the knee to Baal.” My point in bringing this up is that the encouraging words of what God was doing “behind the scenes” served to lift Elijah’s spirits and give him the strength to press on. The same is true for the Jerusalem believers when they heard of the wonderful things God had done among the Gentiles. Folks, we must never forget to tell our stories of God’s grace, mercy, and movement in and through our lives so that others will find hope and strength to press on in obedience to the Lord.

March 8

Matthew 23:23-24

Now begins the challenging devotions for this week. I say challenging because I said to pastor Aaron this morning, this sermon forces me to try to make black and white an area that is somewhat gray. I call it gray because it is one of those areas in which we must leave room for others to grow. It is the call to focus on what really matters in our faith and to rightly discern what are the essentials of the Christian faith. Tradition, preferences, personalities, upbringing, and history all play into what we often consider necessary to be good Christians. The hard part is sifting through the “minors” to find the real “majors” of our faith. Jesus told the Pharisees they were guilty of straining out gnats and swallowing camels (Matt. 23:23-24).

When I said above that I am attempting to make a gray area black and white, I am referring to the need to create a category within our hearts and minds for different convictions concerning tertiary matters. Tertiary matters are those that hold far less significance or importance as opposed to primary and secondary issues. Somehow, we, led by the Scriptures, are to form this category and develop this skill to prevent two distinct and negative outcomes from occurring. Al Mohler and later Gavin Ortlund wrote that we must learn to perform theological triage when it comes to determining what is most urgent and what is not. We have to rightly determine which doctrines or theological claims are of the utmost importance and which can be loosened for the sake of unity. “In his book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage*, pastor Ortlund addresses the basic questions raised by a triage mindset: When should doctrine divide, and when should unity prevail?”

I like how he breaks down the subjects as follows: “First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself. Second-rank doctrines are urgent to the church’s healthy functioning at the local and denominational level. Third-rank doctrines are important—but not important enough to justify separation among Christians. And fourth-rank doctrines are those that, in the final analysis, aren’t essential for the sake of gospel ministry or collaboration among believers.” For example, I would put which translation of the Bible to use in the last category while some would make it a first-rank issue.

The danger of misplaced dogmatic legalism is that it creates unnecessary division among brothers and sisters in Christ. Rigid fundamentalists treat every Christian truth claim as of primary importance, so that there is scarcely any difference between affirming the bodily resurrection of Christ and affirming that the Bible condemns dancing as sinful. There is little to no room to disagree with this person. However, as Ortlund warns, theological triage is not as simple as sorting truth from error and giving no quarter to anyone who professes the latter. “The character of the gospel is complex,” he writes. “It contains both truth and grace, both conviction and comfort, both hard edges of logic and deep caverns of mystery. It is at one moment as bracing as a cold breeze and the next as nourishing as a warm meal.” It is a gray area that needs a black and white category.

Don’t give up on me for this week. I will attempt to put meat on the bones as we go, and I trust that the Spirit will help us all make sense of this. In our text from Sunday, Paul appears to compromise with the Christian Jews in Jerusalem while slamming the Gentile believers in Galatia (Galatians 4:10) for adding rituals to pure and simple faith in Jesus for salvation. Why the difference? Was Paul being hypocritical? Stay with me as we try to develop this important category for Christian maturity.

March 9

Galatians 4:8-11, 5:4

The passage that I have chosen for today fits nicely into what we would expect from Paul regarding his belief that we are saved by grace and that there is no righteousness that can be achieved by the works of the Law (Rom. 3:20). We are comfortable knowing that we are saved by grace and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9) and that if we try to add to the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, then we are nullifying and falling away from grace (Gal. 5:4). We have been at this long enough to know that we need not and should not add anything to what Jesus did in order for us to be saved. From our understanding of Scripture, it is grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In this passage written to the Galatians, Paul is addressing Gentiles who have come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel. These men and women were never exposed to the Old Testament Law, knew nothing of Judaism, and had come to salvation strictly by hearing and believing the gospel. They would have never considered being circumcised in keeping with the Mosaic Law or not eating a nice piece of meat from the market because it may have been utilized in some temple ritual. Paul refers to these practices as “weak, worthless, and elemental” and serve to enslave a person to ritual rather than free them to relationship.

Take a look back at Galatians 3:1-3 where you will find that Paul is upset with them for falling back into pagan practices and defecting to Jewish pressures for works-based religion. His point is that these practices enslave them in the never-ending cycle of works to try to please God. They would in essence be picking the yoke of slavery, frustration, and burden back up as they try to perfect in the flesh what the Lord Jesus had done for them in the Spirit (Gal. 3:3). Again, most of us (hopefully all of us) read this in total agreement with what I am saying as it simply reflects what the Scriptures teach us. Like Paul, we would all agree and affirm what he is teaching. So, what is my problem with our text from Sunday (Acts 21:15-26)?

I will write more on this for tomorrow but for today suffice it to know that it appears Paul contradicts much of this in our passage from Acts. I certainly hope your default has become that you know that cannot be the case. Since we believe that is not a possibility, it is necessary that we dig deeper, pray harder, and meditate on what is happening in this text as we lean upon the Spirit for understanding and illumination. This is one of those passages where, as the preacher, I am asking the question, “What is this here for?” We must answer that question if we are going to be true expositors of God’s Word.

We must conclude that what Paul wrote to the Galatians was God-breathed just like every other part of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17). We must also conclude that what is recorded by Luke in Acts 21:20-24 is equally inspired and infallible. These two sections of Scripture, on the surface, may appear to be contradictory which we also believe cannot be. So, for today, I wanted to be sure that we understood that there is nothing that needs to be added to the finished and effective work of Jesus Christ on the cross. His perfect blood was enough to satisfy the demands of the Law and to acquire for all who believe in Him, forgiveness.

That will lead me to a deeper look into what God was teaching us in Acts 21 tomorrow. This is where the categories for various convictions and doctrines must be formed to provide for us the correct places to stand on major and minor issues of our Christian faith, the workings of the church, and just plain love for one another.

March 10

Acts 21:26; Romans 14:17-20a

Today I want us to look at the other side of the coin. Yesterday I wrote about how Paul chastised the Galatian believers for adding to the finished work of Christ by listening to false teachers who told them they had to follow Judaism's ceremonial laws in order to be saved. The crux of the problem was that they were living as if the cross of Christ and His shed blood was insufficient for salvation. They were falling back into a works-based means for salvation. There is a world of difference between what they were doing for salvation and what the Jewish believers were doing as worship in Acts 21.

You see, there is nothing wrong with a person who comes to Christ from Judaism who wishes to maintain some of the ceremonial liturgy of their former religion. For example, if a Messianic Jew still wants to go to the temple or synagogue at certain times of the day to pray, let them. If they feel they still cannot eat certain foods because of their convictions, so be it. If they want to wear a kippah (skull cap) in the sanctuary, who cares. If a Muslim gets saved and still wants to pray 5 times a day on their knees to our God, there is nothing wrong with that. If they can't eat bacon because it just doesn't feel right, leave them be. The point that I am making is that these things are not the essentials of the Christian faith, so we must make room for the nonessentials that end up being customs, traditions, or preferences – as long as they are not sin!

What Paul did in response to the concern that James and the elders had because of the Jewish believers being upset about him allegedly telling others to forsake Moses and the customs was to operate within the "gray" category that he maintained for such times as this. Paul knew that it was both unwise and unnecessary to make a big deal over a minor issue. How can I call it minor in light of what I wrote about yesterday you might ask? Actually, I hope that you would be thinking along those lines so that you will learn to wrestle with hard texts and search until you get an answer.

You must understand that the Jewish believers who are being referenced in Acts 21:20ff are truly followers of Christ. They have heard the gospel message, exercised faith in Christ on the cross, repented of their sins, and started their journey following Jesus in obedience. The simple truth of the matter is that old habits are hard to break and some of them aren't really necessary to break. Picture the Jew who used to practice certain ceremonial rituals of the Law who now understands that Jesus is the Messiah and the fulfillment of those customs. They come to realize that He is the paschal lamb – the sacrificial Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. Think for a moment about the various aspects of the way the Jews would have celebrated the Passover and then imagine how much more special it would be to walk through that ceremony knowing Jesus has come. Even as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I can't help but think of how much richer it might be if we better understood the elements in light of the Jewish Passover. I think of the beauty of ceremonially washing your arms and hands knowing that Jesus has washed me clean through and through. Why would I feel the need to tell a Jewish follower of Christ that they should stop exercising these customs just because I don't do them or because they are not necessary, as long as they are doing them out of love and adoration for Christ and not to earn the favor of God?

Dear ones, there are many such categories that we must learn to see as acceptable forms of worship...or not. More on this tomorrow.

March 11

1 Corinthians 15:1-5

If you were put in a position in which you had just a short time to communicate information to people whom you love, what would you say concerning how a person is to be saved? You're on the clock, there is a short window open and you need to get down to that which is absolutely essential. You don't have time to waste talking about what version of the Bible they should read from, what they should wear to church, what style of music they should listen to, or of what their diet should consist. My simple point is that you would get down to the nitty gritty of what truly matters. Friends, that is a good measure of what we should focus on in this subject.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians reminding them that he had focused on "first matters" in his dissemination of information to them. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 he wrote, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Do you see that? The Bible tells us what matters most right here in regard to the gospel. We must develop the category for understanding what issues are worth going to battle over and those that are not. There must be room in the body of Christ for different expressions of worship, of varying convictions over matters that are not "of first importance", and we must not go to war causing division, anger, confusion, and disunity over matters that could be covered with love.

Pastor Aaron and I were talking about this the other day and was reminded of what we say when we are standing in the baptismal pool with folks who we are about to baptize. We thought of the questions that we ask in that precious moment. They all deal with making sure the candidate knows and believes that they are sinners, and that God sent His Son Jesus to earth to save them. We verify that they know Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, died on the cross for their sins, rose again, and ascended to the Father. We make sure that they have prayed to God for forgiveness and have surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. They dear friends, are the essentials.

Too many people waste too much time defending their views on such things as the rapture. Folks will lose friends over whether or not believers will be raptured out before the tribulation, half way through, or after. They will make this issue as important as the virgin birth of Christ. I have personally heard people want to waste time defending the King James version of the Bible, as if anyone who reads another translation either does not love Jesus or may actually be going to hell. Churches have split and new ones started because there are those who believe women should never wear pants, never cut their hair, and never wear makeup. It seems crazy to me, but it really happens. Folks, these are people who are making secondary matters as vital as what Paul would call matters of "first importance." Surely you understand what I am writing about?

Now, there are issues that, although they may not be of first importance, they still carry some importance. For example, we need to know why we do not baptize infants, why church discipline matters, why the congregation should have a voice in decisions made in the life of the church, and so on. We need to know who we are and why, but we must learn how to see others who hold differing views in some areas as brothers and sisters too. The late R. C. Sproul believed in infant baptism while John MacArthur does not. They were best friends and often shared the stage and their pulpits with each other. They could do this because they knew how to emphasize matters of first importance while leaving room for love and grace on matters of less importance. That is what Paul is doing in Acts 21.

March 12

Romans 14:13-20

The entirety of the “gray area” that I have been writing about this week is captured in this passage chosen for today. The text begins with an admonition not to put any stumbling block in a brother’s way. First of all, notice that Paul is referring to the other person as a brother. So, we are talking about behavior among believers. As we work through today’s point to ponder, I ask for your grace as I began the week reminding you that it is challenging to make “black and white” an area that is filled with wiggle room.

In verses 14 and 15, Paul is emphasizing the overall importance of acting in love towards another believer. If they feel that it is important to wear their finest clothes to church and you feel that what you wear doesn’t matter, both of you should be okay with where each other lands on that issue. The person who wears a suit and tie may be motivated from a place of gratitude and thanksgiving and may have this mindset: God gave me His best so I am determined to give Him my best in all areas of my life. That is a wonderful motivation! Likewise, the person who doesn’t “dress up” but comes in the building in a more casual attire may have this mindset: I am so thankful for the finished work of Christ on the cross and I know that I add nothing nor have to add anything to what He did for me. I am accepted, redeemed, and whole in the presence of my King. That is a wonderful motivation! Nobody is wrong and both parties are right and pleasing to the Lord.

Paul stated it this way in verse 18, “For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.” He is referring to what he had just written in the previous verse where he said, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Dear friends, please consider the fact that people can love Jesus and are allowed to express that in ways that may be a little different from how you choose to express your love. We are encouraged in verse 19 to pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

I cannot begin to tell you how many times through my 21+ years of serving as your pastor that I have had to maintain peace by realizing and responding towards people with an understanding that they need patience and acceptance right now and not a “sermon” as to why I am right, and they are wrong. When God is at work in another person’s life and I jump in His way with burdens that they are not yet ready to carry, I may be guilty of “tearing down the work of God” for the sake of my personal convictions on matters that need not be dealt with yet (v.20). If I try to feed a one-year-old steak, I am putting them in grave danger. Let me draw this week of point to ponder to a close with another gentle reminder.

Sometimes in the lives of the brothers and sisters that we worship and serve with here at Smyrna, there is a weakness that may exist in them simply because their spiritual muscles are not yet developed enough to carry the weight of some of the more challenging truths of our faith. There are elementary and foundational stones that must be laid and secured before the building is erected. Love for one another will give us patience, gentleness, and kindness towards each other. Spiritual maturity will give us the wisdom to know when to press and when to patiently wait for a better time to teach. In the meantime, as we experience tremendous growth in our church, it is vitally important that we learn how to focus on the important issues and minor on the lesser ones. Make room for others to grow and to express love and faith in ways that reflect their heart and relationship with the Lord Jesus; especially when it may be a bit different from yours.